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Botha, Colin Graham

Prices in the eighteenth  
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## PRICES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY,

BY

C. GRAHAM BOTHA,

Chief Archivist, Union of South Africa.

308

Z

Box 168

Read July 9, 1923.

Among the Cape Archives preserved at Capetown are a few which should prove of value to the student of economics of the 18th century. While there is not an excessive number of private ledgers or accounts of household expenditure, yet those that are extant are helpful in studying the prices of every-day articles or the amount paid for work performed. One of the most valuable sources of information is the annexures to the liquidation accounts filed in the Orphan Chamber. The office of the Master of the Supreme Court of to-day performs to a great extent the same work undertaken by the Board of Orphan Masters. This government institution saw to the administration of the estates of those who died intestate or those who appointed them as executors. The liquidation and distribution of such estates are filed with the records of the Orphan Chamber. The annexures to these accounts are the detailed bills sent in by professional men for services rendered, by tradesmen and artisans and various other persons. Here we should expect to find the accounts rendered by the grocer, the tailor and the shoemaker lying side by side with those sent in by the physician and the undertaker. The details of such accounts are in many instances highly entertaining.

Prices at the Cape fluctuated at various times. There were good years, bad years and medium years; years when war affected the price of articles, and years of drought when the farmer could produce little. During the war between England and Holland, with France as her ally, in 1781 several French regiments augmented the Cape garrison. This brought increased business and an increase of prices. Money was readily made and people began building themselves palatial houses or remodelling their old ones. Old furniture gave place to that of the latest fashion, and the people dressed with some splendour. But this was only for a few years, when, as in similar circumstances even in modern times, the crash came. The war being over, the garrison was greatly reduced, and the law courts were kept busy with civil cases for debt incurred.



In this contribution I wish to give only a few examples of prices as found in the records. It will indicate to the student that the material is available for obtaining some idea of the prices of everyday articles at different periods of the 18th century. In translating the Dutch money, as given in the records, into English values, I have taken the rixdollar at four shillings, the schelling at sixpence, and the stiver at one penny.

In a book of household expenses for the years 1754 and 1755 we gather the following prices:—Butter cost 8d. per lb.; white sugar, 5d. per lb.; dried pears were 3d. and 2d.; dried figs, 6d. per lb. respectively. But the householder has noted that the best butter cost him 6d. per lb. The price per lb. of the following was:—Large raisins, 4d.; ginger, 9d.; and almonds were bought at 6d. per thousand. A new hat for one of his slaves cost 2s. 6d., and one for himself 14s. He paid the shoemaker 5s. for making a pair of shoes, having supplied him with the uppers and soles of English leather. A half-dozen hand dusters cost 5s. 6d., and he considered narrow white flannel at 1s. 8d. per "el" expensive. For two casks of Danish beer, from which he tapped altogether 312 bottles, he paid £5 16s., and for bringing it from the wharf or ship, 12s. Four loads of "duynhout" were £2 2s. 8d., and a "Comyne" cheese of 22 lb. weight was thought cheap at 6d. per lb.

The next items are taken from various accounts and ledgers covering the period 1742 to 1762. In 1742 it cost 1s. per load for removing old reeds, and 1s. 6d. per load for stones. In the following year we find half an aum of lime priced at 3s. 4d. and 2s. 6d. The price per "el" of blue velvet for covering cushions was 7s. in 1745, and bricks cost 12s. per thousand in 1746. Items in the year 1751 show that 1 lb. of tea cost 3s., a pair of woollen socks 2s., and a blue handkerchief 2s. 6d. In 1759 8 lb. of coffee beans cost one rixdollar and four schellings, 12 lb. of sugar two rixdollars, 12 lb. of raisins one rixdollar two schellings, and a pound of butter 7d.

The price of farming implements appears to have increased much between the years 1744 and 1792, in some instances more than 50 per cent. The cost of some of these are:—A pleasure wagon, 60 rixdollars or £12 in 1744, but 140 rds. or £28 in 1792; a harrow had increased from £1 to £1 12s., a wheelbarrow from 12s. to £1, the wheel for the same from 4s. to 6s., and a plough from £2 8s. to £4. The blacksmith's charge for a ploughshare in 1744 was 12s., but £1 8s. in 1792; to put on a ploughshare had increased from 4s. to 14s., and for making a pick from 4s. to 7s.

The sale of tobacco was in the hands of the Dutch East India Company. From time to time laws were passed prohibiting the planting of tobacco by the Cape farmers. It was feared that if they were allowed this privilege it would interfere with the trade from which the Company derived a large profit. This was especially so in the early days of the settlement when tobacco

was much used for bartering with the natives. Before 1705 the right to sell tobacco to the public was given to the highest bidder, the article having to be bought from the Company and sold at fixed prices. In 1693 Virginian and Brazilian tobacco was sold by the Company for 3s. 4d. per lb. and was allowed to be retailed by the lessee for 4s. 2d. With the abolition in 1705 of the leasing of this right to sell, the public had to buy direct from the authorities. Between 1726 and 1733 the average price of tobacco per lb. appears to have been about 1s. 1d. The prices of the Virginian and Brazilian tobacco were higher than those obtained for tobacco from Mauritius.

In the South African Public Library, Capetown, is a very interesting book containing the household accounts of the first British Governor at the Cape, Lord Macartney. The items for 1798 show interesting details, of which only a few are given below:—12 lb. of wax candles at 4s. per lb., 3 hair brooms for 16s., the band of the 84th for playing on the 4th June, £1; one month's washing, 4s.; loaf sugar at 2s. 6d. per lb.; two dozen Cape beer at 5d. per bottle; two sacks of potatoes for £1 17s.; a load of wood, £1 6s.; 12 lb. of tea at 42 rixdollars or £8 8s., or 14s. per lb., seems a rather high figure when compared with to-day. Ten sacks of charcoal cost 106 rixdollars or £21 4s.

It may not be uninteresting to close this short sketch by taking the prices charged by the undertaker for supplying a coffin and linen. In 1759 an account showed that an amount of £2 8s. was paid for the material and making of a teak wood coffin and for the supplying of 7 "els" of white linen at 1s. 2d. per "el," and of 20 "els" of black linen 2s. 6d.

#### REFERENCES TO WEIGHTS AND MEASURES.

92lbs. Dutch equalled 100lbs. English, the true ratio however was 91:8 Dutch pounds=100lbs. English avoirdupois. One ell=27 Rhyndland inches. One yard=37 Rhyndland inches.

The proportion between Dutch ells and English yards was generally taken at 3 yards to 4 ells, but the rate was 100 yards to 129 2-7 ells.

The bottles were of various sizes but it was generally reckoned one gallon to four and a half bottles.

A half aum was 2 bushels.

On March 4, 1925



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